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Vietnam — with two wars

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John Cassidy's new novel is about two wars.

The first is the intelligence war in a small province of Vietnam on the eve of the Tet offensive. Toby Busch, a CIA agent who's gotten a blot on his record in Frankfurt, volunteers as an agent in the field helping US and South Vietnamese forces "pacify" the region.

Busch has to train men, find a security leak, recruit his own agents and somehow penetrate the Viet Cong shield around their preparations for Tet in time to convince his superiors, in spite of his weakened credibility.

Cassidy's account of the men and women — enemies, comrades and lovers — that Busch weaves into his intelligence net is low-key but powerful. His prose is workmanlike, but his characters really come alive as thoughtful, rounded people in a complex and exciting fix.

A mild-mannered married man from Iowa, with his wife and kids safe in the heart of the United States, Busch finds himself having two affairs — one romantic and oriental, centered in his most crucial spy operation, and the other playful and blondly all-American, until the press of danger makes the play deadly serious. Though he's always shunned combat on fat European assignments, in the end he finds himself and one buddy waging war against the whole VC charge on their town.

REVIEW / BOOK

A STATION IN THE DELTA, by John Cassidy. Scribners. $9.95. 330 pp.

The heartthrobs and adventures that Cassidy creates for his characters are as gripping and noble as the adventure stories in any war, and it's kind of surprising to realize that Vietnam was not that different a war. You can tell some just plain good war stories about it, and Cassidy has found some.

But he bears a grudge about the reputation that the Vietnam war got, and the second war his novel is about is the war of the American press and television against the war in Vietnam, against our presence there and against our trying to wage that war as if it were a war of liberation or a war in which real, distinct values and freedoms were plainly at stake.

Several of Cassidy's characters come across reporters who invariably distort and callously ridicule their motives and deeds. It is odd to find this kind of heavy-handed stereotyping in a novel in which the main action concerns the way an agent who's been wrongly scapegoated works his way free of a bad wrap. The press is Cassidy's scapegoat for the tragedy of Vietnam. And that's too bad. He's a sensitive writer. If he could have begun to include more of the complex truths about why we were in Vietnam and what we were doing there, his good novel would be considerably better.

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